

## Conference Paper

# Aesthetical Transformation of *Ramayana* Performing Arts in Indonesia and Thailand

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**Abstract**

Over the years, the methods of preserving traditional performing arts have undergone a transformation in many states of Southeast Asia. In that, the performing art societies in Indonesia and Thailand have also made a shift in their conservation strategy from organizing the performing arts as a sacred rite with few participants to massive shows to entertain bigger audiences. This research intended to review the role of *Maecenas* (art protector) in enforcing the existence of *Ramayana* performing arts in three destinations in Indonesia and Thailand, namely Uluwatu's *Kecak Ramayana* in Bali and Prambanan's *Ramayana Ballet* in Central Java, both located in Indonesia, and *Khon Theater* in Bangkok, Thailand. The research used a qualitative descriptive method with functional theory approach. Data were collected through interviews, observation, and document review, following which they were analysed through interpretation. The result of the research showed that the aesthetical transformation of *Ramayana* performing arts in Indonesia and Thailand is determined by three factors, namely locality, time, and management.

**Keywords:** performing arts, *Ramayana*, art protector, conservation

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## 1. Introduction

Conservation has prolonged the hope for survival of traditional performing arts on many states in Southeast Asia. It is believed that the conservation of performing arts give opportunities to performing art conservers not only to develop aesthetical aspect of performing arts and then fortify it from extinction (Sefri Hardiansyah, 2018), but also to improve the welfare of performing artists through social, economic and ecological aspects of ethnic culture (Soeroso & Susuilo, 2008). Indonesia and Thailand are two among the states in Southeast Asia that inherit ethnical-based traditional performing arts, and both have witnessed a fact that the function of their performing arts has undergone transformation. This fact was discussed in the article titled with *Transformation of Mask Function From Ritual To Performance Art During Indianization Era In Indonesia*.

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That article explained that cultural transformation of India performing arts in Indonesia and Thailand is a certainty, or in other words, inescapable (Hidajat et al., 2019).

Thailand, one of ethnical states in Southeast Asia, must bear witness to the shifting of the function of its traditional performing arts from protecting art legacy to giving entertainment. This shift, however, has good implication to the improvement of economic welfare of tourism sector entrepreneurs (Yana, 2019). Surprisingly, Indonesia and Thailand apply quite same conservationist strategy on performing arts, at least institutionally, which involves the shift from previously using traditional custom institutions as art conservationist to later assigning education institutions and creative industries as the vanguard (Kamil, 2015). Due to the change of the ages, traditional custom institutions are no longer capable to support the existence of its conserver artists and cannot anymore actualize traditional artists' profession. Transformation on performing arts also happens in Bali, one of Indonesia provinces, where ancestral culture always undergoes redefinition in order to inseminate a new life power to the existing culture (Hendra Santosa, 2019).

Performing art societies in Indonesia and Thailand have shifted their conservation strategy from presenting performing arts as an exclusive sacred rite with few participants to become an up-scale show for tourists (Afrianto & Muhajir, 2020). The decision to shift the function of performing arts to become a tourism show is a strategic anticipation to the change of people interest, and the presence of people as audiences is needed to maintain the viability of traditional performing arts (Sari et al., 2020). Entertaining tourists is like giving a new life purpose for traditional performing arts, or precisely, like providing a new spot for performing artists to revive the past exoticism sensation to please many audiences (Kanzunudin, 2011). The managing boards of tourism performing arts in Indonesia and Thailand have same feeling about that shift, and therefore, they make a lot of preparations, including on infrastructure, artist resource, creativity, and even promotion strategy. Taking this matter into consideration, researchers then carry out observation on three destinations that present Ramayana performing arts, and each destination is located in Java, Bali and Bangkok.

Developing tourism performing arts at tourist destination is a strategy to create good image and pleasant fantasy (Dharma, 2018). The making of such image or fantasy is a part of efforts to conserve traditional performing arts, which is precisely done by supporting the existing traditional artists and providing opportunities to the young academic artists to advance their career on performing arts (Hidajat, 2018).

Mostly, the managing boards of tourist destinations conserve traditional values through technical approach, and this is done by exploiting the sale value of traditional

culture. Government seems agree with this exploitation and declares that it is good for contributing national exchange (Suharto et al., 2020). In other research, it was said that mask puppet performing arts and various archaeological destinations in Tumpang District are supposed to be attractive enough for tourism. However, those potentials are not optimally developed due to lack of synergic collaboration between tourism agents and local government in promoting this District. Therefore, it is not surprising if tourists who go for Bromo Mount, which surely require them to go across Tumpang District, always ignore the fascination of that District (Hidajat, 2017). Another research declared that traditional performing arts should metamorphize into a new form but still take source from tradition and be served in cheaper price without eliminating its sacred value (Suharti, 2012).

Nowadays, traditional performing arts are no longer presented on specific site or occasion, especially for the interests of sacred rites or traditional customs of the conserver societies. Performing arts can be played in any time after tourism travel agencies make communication about it. Tourists are benefited from seeing the presentation of performing arts on the time when they arrive at destination. The appearance of performing arts for tourism is not sacred anymore but under the shadows of tradition, religion, and metamorphosis urge. By considering all these statements as background, the current research attempts to review the strategic role of *Maecenas* (art protector) in the development of performing arts at the observation sites (precisely, tourist destinations).

## 2. Method

Method of research is qualitative descriptive with functional theory approach. Data were collected through interview, observation, and documentation review. Three key informants were involved on interview, and they are Ida Bagus Ketut Sudiasa (58 years old), a lecturing staff at the State University of Jakarta, who is also a Balinese traditional choreographer; Rinto Widyanto (56 years old), the Chair of Department of Classical Dance-Drama at the Indonesia Art Institute of Denpasar; and M. Soleh Adi Pramono (67 years old), a puppeteer of leather puppet, who is also the leader of Mangundarmo House of Art in Tumpang, Malang. The main objective of this research is to review and describe the strategies possibly used to develop and protect the function of performing arts as the conservation effort on traditional performing arts. Knowledge and experiences of *Maecenas*(art protector) are examined and then explored further by conducting observation on three tourist destinations in Indonesia and Thailand, namely

Uluwatu's Kecak Ramayana in Bali dan Prambanan's Ramayana Ballet in Central Java, which both are located in Indonesia, and Khon Theater in Bangkok, Thailand. It can be said therefore that, besides interview, this research also obtains data from observation, which are then substantiated by documentation review.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

Transformation of traditional performing arts is done by conserving, fostering and managing the arts through tourism system. All these efforts represent the aesthetical conditioning on the fascination of performing arts (Pratiwi, 2020). It should be noted that the early function of traditional performing arts has changed greatly after transformation. Despite this change, there are three factors that still influence the aesthetical aspect of tourism performing arts, namely (1) the imitation of original version, (2) the presentation at limited time duration, and (3) the desire of audiences (Hersapandi, 2017). These factors must be taken into consideration because the elements of performing arts are no longer oriented toward ritual ceremonies that are usually organized by custom institutions, but it is designed to be the art works that can be managed by the artists to fulfil their need for self-existence.

Both Indonesia and Thailand have two similarities in aesthetical transformation of Ramayana performing arts. One similarity is on the conditioning of performing arts to be the show with many audiences, whereas the other is on the managerial span of tourist destination. Those two similarities are explained as following.

#### 3.1. Prambanan's Ramayana Ballet

The conditioning of aesthetical aspect in Ramayana Ballet on Prambanan Open Stage is done by scheduling several groups to play by turns. Although each group is unique, but all groups are conditioned to play Ramayana Ballet less than one hour. All performer groups are under coordination of Roro Jonggrang Foundation, and they are given same opportunity to play on either open stage or close stage (in *pendopo* / audience hall). They are scheduled to play three times a week, starting from March to October.

Every group that plays Ramayana Ballet on open stage may involve more or less than 100 dancers. Each group is allocated with more or less same production fund. If there is difference in fund, it is all about the needs for artistic style, especially when the group must play Ramayana Ballet in Surakarta style or Yogyakarta style.

Since 1999, there are only 2 groups playing Ramayana Ballet with Yogyakarta style, while there are 3-4 groups for Surakarta style. Despite this difference, each group is given same opportunity to play. Every group must follow the play schedule predetermined by the managing boards of Prambanan Tourism Park, and the commitment of the group to this schedule is a proof of understanding between the managing boards and the performers.

Audiences are managed in transparent way through a cooperation with tourism travel agencies. Tourists are brought to the destination where they are escorted to watch the show. Time allocation is already well planned, and therefore, the readiness to play Ramayana Ballet in front of tourists is a proof of good conditioning. In certain case, there is a special occasion when the audience is mostly students. Those students are intentionally arranged to watch Ramayana Ballet in order to develop their appreciation to the play in particular or to the performing arts in general.

Bali bombing has once put Roro Jonggrang Foundation in financial distress due to the great reduction in audience number. Managing boards use a strategy of building emotional bonding with school institutions. Students are given special discounts by expecting that their experience of watching Ramayana Ballet will give them something to memorize for the next 5 to 10 years. After the students graduate from their school, or become an adult, at least, some will watch again Ramayana Ballet to satisfy their nostalgia.

### **3.2. Uluwatu's Kecak Ramayanain Bali**

Audiences of Uluwatu's Kecak Ramayana in Bali are preconditioned by tourism travel agencies. The actual goal of visiting Uluwatu is to enjoy the natural sensation of archaic temple at the edge of sea cliff. To experience this sensation, visitors must enter the area of Uluwatu Temple and shall pay ticket for IDR 30,000. After passing entry gate, they are given saput cloth to be wrapped around the waist, or any cloths to cover the open thigh, usually for tourists who wear shorts. These cloths are the borrowing material, and therefore must be returned to the caretaker. Wearing saput cloth is an ethical posture before entering the scared site. Such fashion-related arrangement is even considered sensational by either local or international visitors.

However, travel agencies do not specifically bring tourists to watch Kecak Ramayana. Most visitors only pay to enter the environment of Uluwatu Temple and wander around to enjoy the scenery around the Temple. If visitors desire to watch Kecak Ramayana, they are required to pay not only IDR 30,000 for entering the environment of Uluwatu

Temple but also spend another cost as much as IDR 100,000 for having a seat at audience bench of Kecak Ramayana.

Ticket booth for Kecak Ramayana is usually open at 5 pm. After holding ticket, visitors are escorted to the seat. There are more or less 1,500 seats available and during good season, those seats can be fully occupied in less than 30 minutes.

At 6 pm, in Central Indonesia Time Zone, the play of Kecak Ramayana is started after some officers put the audience in order. These officers are selected from the surrounding society, and the selection process is handled by *sekaa* of *banjar*, who is also the caretaker of Uluwatu Temple and the site of Kecak Ramayana. Those officers are not wearing public servant uniform, which signifies that the responsibility regarding conservation of performing arts lays on the hand of custom institution, although the current goal of performing arts is mostly commercial. Number of audience is always around 1,500 persons in every presentation, and this number is a great contribution to the existence of performing art groups.

### 3.3. Khon Theaterin Bangkok, Thailand

The presentation of Khon performing arts in a special theatre building was a commitment made by King of Thailand. Two years later, the building was constructed but the early presentation failed to attract audience from local citizens. Same fate was suffered by Sriwedari's Human Puppet in Surakarta where the audience is never more than 20 persons every night. Worse, not even a single one tourism travel agency is willing enough to bring visitors to this classical Javanese performing art.

King of Thailand, the Majesty of Maha Vajiralongkorn with a title of Rama X, then took action for conserving traditional performing arts. The presentation of Ramayana performing arts (*Ramakien*) was then set in the area of *Grand Palace*, which is a popular destination not only for tourists but also tourism travel agencies. Ticket price for *Grand Palace* is 500 bahts or IDR 250,000/head, and this price already includes the transportation fee to theatre building and the charge for watching *Ramakien* in the theatre. *Ramakien* is played five times a day, precisely at 10.30 am, 1.00 pm, 2.30 pm, 4.00 pm, and 5.30 pm, and it is presented only from Sunday to Friday. It can be said that visitors need to buy one ticket only to allow them entering *Grand Palace* and also theatre building where *Ramakien* is played.

Theater building is located quite far from *Grand Palace*, and therefore, distance becomes a weakness factor that complicates tourism travel agencies in delivering tourists to the theatre. Other constraining factor is that there is no decent parking

lot nearby theatre building for bus or passenger vehicles. Despite these problems, the decision to integrate two tickets of *Grand Palace* and theatre into one ticket only is probably a wise solution. The theatre has a capacity of 200 seats, and although it is not fully occupied during Ramakien play, the income from integration ticket surely helps supporting the livelihood of performer artists. Same solution is possible to be used to solve the problem of Sriwedari's human puppet. Integration ticket will allow the visitors of Surakarta Palace to watch the Sriwedari show in palace environment, and the show is played at noon as the consequence of visitation. Same arrangement can also be applied at Yogyakarta Palace where integration ticket will allow visitors to watch various attractions at palace environment. Dance-drama can be played during visitation, and this is possibly a more profitable schedule besides its periodical play on Sunday.

Both Indonesia and Thailand have similar managerial style in organizing tourism performing arts. This similarity is empowering aesthetical aspect of traditional performing arts to satisfy the interest of audience. Besides this similarity, differences are also found regarding the implication of managerial technique on presentation quality, which this quality is determined by aesthetical aspect of presentation. Tourists do not give attention to such differences. Specifically, aesthetical transformation in the presentation of both Ramayana performing arts in Indonesia and Ramakien performing arts in Thailand is influenced by three factors that are explained as following.

#### 1. Factor of Locality

Traditional performing arts are main capital of every tourist destination, and this position is a local knowledge that has been widely known by tourism entrepreneurs (Samson CMS, 2019). Ramayana performing arts need specific treatment, and this treatment is given by substantiating aesthetical aspect of the imitation of original version. Early presentations of Ramayana stories in Java are rooted from human puppet performing arts, which are played either in Surakarta or Yogyakarta styles (Thomas & Kahija, 2019). Imitation product of Ramayana stories is played on Prambanan Open Stage, and this product is called *sendratari* (Indonesian abbreviation for Art-Drama-Dance). The presentation of drama-dance is influenced by the distance of watching in which the audiences can enjoy moves and formation to capture the story played. The show is played with the background of *Candi Prambanan*, which is a high construction that can give marvellous sensation when it is enlightened by spotlight. Uluwatu's Kecak Ramayana is supported by natural environment where it is played on open stage at the edge of cliff that faces directly to the sea. The play becomes very artistic when the scenes are presented with the background of sunset. In the case of *Sala Chalermkrung Royal Theatre*



in Bangkok, Thailand, Ramayana stories are played on *proscenium*, and this is probably influenced by western presentation style.

## 2. Factor of Time

Time allocation can determine how long the visitors can enjoy the views. If visitors want to watch Ramakien in Bangkok, Thailand, they must pay ticket for 500 baths or around IDR 250,000. This ticket is an integration ticket that allows them to enter *Grand Palace* and also to watch Ramakien at *Khon Theater*. If tourism travel agencies do not have adequate time allocation, they may not drive tourists to *Khon Theater* although Ramakien is played five times a day. Each tourism travel agency has different time allocation depending on their priority. It seems that time allocation for Ramakien is same as that for Uluwatu's Kecak Ramayana. In both cases, tourists are mobilized by tourism travel agencies in the morning and at noon to any destination other than Ramayana play. They come for Ramayana play only in the afternoon. It is not because the visitors desire to watch it on that time, but because it is intentionally arranged on that time to make visitors experiencing symbolical sensation of the play. In other words, the aesthetical aspect of Ramayana performing arts is truly and only felt during afternoon play, and this is the main goal of Ramayana play in Uluwatu. However, different perspective must be used in allocating time for watching Ramayana Ballet on Prambanan Open Stage. The show is open play and tourism travel agencies can arrange the tourists directly to the open stage for watching the play. This watching activity is not related whatsoever with the visit to Candi Prambanan. International tourists are usually arranged to watch Ramayana play while they have a dinner. The show is begun at 7 pm and played for 2 hours. After watching the show, the tourists are escorted to the hotel. So far, it can be said that time allocation is a factor that can make aesthetical aspect of performing arts to be played in precise, efficient and simple (concise) ways (Marajaya, 2019).

## 3. Factor of Management

The management of Ramayana performing arts in Indonesia and Thailand is associated with production cost. Ramayana Ballet in Prambanan Open Stage is played by several performer groups by turns. Every play will get fund allocation as much as IDR 1,000,000 and the play can involve more or less 100 artists (dancer and musician). Kecak Ramayana in Uluwatu is played only by one performer group under the management of custom institution in the area where Uluwatu Temple resides. The artists are given cumulative salary, which can be monthly or quarterly.



A dancer of Kecak Ramayana may have income of IDR 1,500,000. Meanwhile, at *Sala Chalermkrung Royal Theatre* in Bangkok, Thailand, the show of Ramakien is played only by one performer group. The artists get salary from government, and it is just like the managerial condition of artists in Sriwedari's Human Puppet.

Regarding to the management of performing arts, transformation of aesthetical aspect of performing arts is a process called *conditioned artistic conservation*. Such process can only be done by (1) custom village institution and (2) foundation or special unit as tourism management agency that directly answers to the government.

Under certain circumstances, or possibly not intentionally, tourism travel agencies may drive the tourists to visit destination that presents traditional performing arts. Aesthetically, the goal of this visit is to make the tourists watching and experiencing the authenticity of traditional performing arts (Putra & Lodra, 2019). Principally, the factor of management is underlaid by Indonesian version of tourism guidance, which is called *Sapta Pesona Wisata* (Putri, Shafy Almira Tsanya & Made Suastika, 2020).

## 4. Conclusion

Research has investigated transformation of aesthetical aspect in Ramayana performing arts on three tourist destinations of Indonesia and Thailand, namely Prambanan Open Stage, Kecak Ramayana in Uluwatu, and *Sala Chalermkrung Royal Theatre*.

All those destinations have one similarity, which is, on the involvement of *Maece-nas*(art protector), and in this research, the role of art protector is usually played by custom institution. In Thailand, the custom institution is represented by the King who himself makes a policy to integrate the ticket to *Grand Palace* with the operational of *Sala Chalermkrung Royal Theatre*. Ramayana play on Prambanan Open Stage is managed by Roro Jonggrang Foundation that acts not only as custom institution but also as the extension of the government. Custom society around Uluwatu Temple in Bali becomes custom institution with responsibility to manage Uluwatu's Kecak Ramayana. All these art protectors give great contribution not only to the existence of Ramayana performing arts, but also to the viability of traditional performing arts, especially in the area where art protectors live.

*Maecenas* (art protector) plays great role behind conservation and transformation of aesthetical aspect in Ramayana performing arts. The existence of art protector can also determine the way of presenting Ramayana stories. Therefore, aesthetical

transformation of Ramayana performing arts in Indonesia and Thailand is determined by three factors, which respectively are (1) factor of locality, (2) factor of time, and (3) factor of management.

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